Chartists

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Sections

Chartism was a massive, working-class political movement that became a prominent feature of British politics between 1837 and 1848. The name Chartist was a derivation from their petitioning activities, which culminated in the presentation of three People's Charters to parliament in 1838, 1842, and 1848. While unsuccessful in achieving their immediate goals, the group became a potent symbol of early working-class political agitation, for radicals and conservatives alike.

Background

To understand the significance of Chartism to early Victorian politics, it is necessary to understand the political and social milieu from which the coalition emerged. The late 1820s and early 1830s were heady years for British reformers. The Whig party, with the aid of Daniel O'Connell's massive support in Ireland, had outmaneuvered the Tories, forcing them to submit to the repeal of the Test and Corporation Acts in 1828 and to Catholic emancipation in 1829. The death of George IV brought with it hope that the new regime would bring the reform of “old corruption” – the end to sinecures, preferments, rotten boroughs, and more. A poor harvest in 1829 sparked higher bread prices and the increased politicization of the working classes. In the south and east of the country,

agricultural laborers expressed their anger at high prices and low wages in the so-called Swing Riots. In the wake of the repeal of the Combination Acts (1824), trade union activity was on an upswing, and in April 1831 a variety of London-based radical groups combined their resources into the National Union of the Working Classes. In some instances workers and moderate middle-class reformers were willing to work together to campaign for national electoral reforms. This was the case with the Birmingham General Political Union, which formed in 1830. Robert Owen, while reeling from the failure of New Harmony, had returned to Glasgow to find that over 300 cooperative societies had been founded throughout Britain. In 1830 Owenite socialism provided Britain's most viable philosophic alternative to laissez-faire political economy, and it found an increasingly eager reception among the British proletariat. Given the July Revolution in France (1830), these events created an atmosphere that many believed was ripe for social and political change.

Despite some concern among conservatives that an alliance between the working classes and the middle classes was possible in the early 1830s, it was unlikely. In general, the middle classes were uninterested in wide-sweeping electoral reform that would embrace all workers. Likewise, the interests of the middle classes were being well served by a government whose policies generally steered toward laissez-faire economic policies – the Corn Laws notwithstanding. So the 1832 Reform Acts and the Municipal Corporations Act (1835), which attempted to reform the grossest electoral abuses within the kingdoms, left the working classes little to show for their alliance with the bourgeoisie. The Reform Acts removed many of the rotten boroughs and they gave more representation to growing cities such as Leeds, Sheffield, and Manchester. Furthermore, they regularized property qualifications for voting and expanded the franchise. Nevertheless, the resulting legislation only extended the vote to one out of every seven adult males. This was hardly the wish of radical reformers, many of whom argued for universal male suffrage. And the fallout from the 1832 reforms was such that it put the interests of the

increasingly politicized working classes at odds with the enfranchised wealth of the growing middle classes. By splitting the coalition of the middle classes and the working classes, the elite had maintained their hold on power and undermined the potential for more radical reform, at least in the short term.

The failure of the working classes to gain any political leverage in 1832 did not put an end to working-class radicalism. In fact, spurred by the potential for reform, they continued to organize and pressure the government, both through legal and illegal means. The enfranchised inadvertently gave the working classes the motivation to organize more cohesive class-based political organizations. The conservatives were generally opposed to major social or political reforms. They were ardent protectors of the Church of England and their own landed interests. Thus, they strenuously protected the 1815 Corn Laws, which guaranteed their financial well-being through protective tariffs. Their status as landholders put them at odds with their tenants, who felt their greed in the form of high rents and evictions. The land situation was particularly pronounced in Ireland, sparking the creation of secret societies such as the Whiteboys and the Rockites, who used violence and intimidation to protect their meager possessions.

For their part, landowners used the potent legal mechanisms at their disposal to retaliate. A particularly apt example of this retaliation relates to the 1834 case of the Tolpuddle Martyrs, a group of six agricultural workers from Dorsetshire who had organized legally as the Friendly Society of Agricultural Labourers. They were prosecuted by a local landowner, not for combining, but for administering an oath, prohibited under the 1797 Illegal Oaths Act. Just one of many examples of the elite's abuse of power, the Tolpuddle case became a cause célèbre in the radical and trade union press – a powerful symbol for disenfranchised British and Irish workers.

Likewise, the enfranchised liberals found themselves at odds with the desires of the masses. While they were willing to remove the privileges of

the Church of England, including the imposition of church rates, liberals tended to favor free trade capitalism as a panacea to social ills. Thus, for them, especially among the factory owners of the North, the Corn Laws became symbolic of illegitimate landed influence on the economy. These businessmen argued that the Corn Laws kept grain at an artificially inflated price. Ostensibly a humanitarian appeal on the grounds that the repeal of the Corn Laws would raise the average standard of living, astute radicals recognized that a drop in grain prices would be accompanied by a decline in wages. At best, the standard of living would stay the same for the average wage laborer.

For the working classes, the most objectionable action from the free trade liberals was the passage of the English Poor Law Act of 1834, followed by similar acts in Scotland (1845) and Ireland (1838). Overturning the Elizabethan statutes, the 1834 act – the child of the Benthamite Edwin Chadwick – took a draconian approach to poverty. Working from the assumption that relief for the poor created a cycle of dependence and laziness among otherwise able-bodied laborers, the new Poor Law mandated the creation of workhouses in every parish. Workers had to submit themselves to a prison-like regime of workhouse order to receive aid. For many, the cure was worse than the disease. And, in any case, economic cycles – especially in the industrial North – often led to high rates of unemployment with which the workhouses were ill-prepared to cope. The response was an anti-Poor Law movement, which helped consolidate the political ambitions of the various working-class movements, including the nascent Chartist movement of the late 1830s.

Birth of Chartism

Chartism was a broad-based national coalition that formed from several movements among the working classes. Because of the diversity in leadership and different regional concerns, there were, at times, breakdowns in leadership and consensus among self-professed Chartists.

Nevertheless, the Chartists had an overarching political and social reform agenda that gave the group a unified character for a decade. The leaders articulated the group's platform within a class-conscious framework. However, unlike the Owenites who suggested that social inequality was the product of economic disenfranchisement, the Chartists argued that the roots of social and economic inequality could be found in the political system. Thus, their ultimate objective was to reform the political system, but this did not mean that they were unconcerned with relieving social ills.

As early as 1836 the Chartist leadership began to coalesce. Led by William Lovett, a London cabinetmaker, a small group of artisans formed the London Working Men's Association (LWMA). Focusing much of their energies on pamphleteering, Lovett, the group's secretary, was effective in creating a large coalition of like-minded individuals and organizations throughout Britain. This included influential organizers such as Robert Owen and Feargus O'Connor, the editor of the Northern Star, a Leeds newspaper which became the printed voice of Chartism after 1838. Between 1836 and 1837 Lovett drafted what became the People's Charter, a six-point program for a massive reform of the electoral system. The first draft of the People's Charter called for universal suffrage. However, to solidify their support among male laborers, the provision for female suffrage was soon dropped. Despite this, many women were supportive of Chartism, and they played an integral role in the movement through organizing, petitioning, writing, fundraising, and forming nearly 150 women's Chartist organizations throughout Britain and Ireland between 1838 and 1852.

In general, Chartist women supported the primacy of universal male suffrage, often with the assumption that universal female suffrage would follow soon thereafter. The People's Charter also called for the abolition of property qualifications to vote, annual parliaments, voting by ballot, and a rewriting of electoral districts. A sixth demand would provide a

salary for MPs, a provision that would allow working-class MPs to participate in the London parliament. Traveling the countryside in the wake of the 1837 economic depression, Lovett, O'Connor, and their fellow Chartist leaders were able to generate mass support for their program.

O'Connor quickly became the de facto leader of the movement. He linked the Chartist agenda with that of the anti-Poor Law movement. And, traveling through the midland and northern counties, he formed close associations with radical leaders such as Richard Oastler and Joseph Rayner Stephens. Massive torchlight meetings, which accompanied Oastler's and Stephens' calls for sabotage and strikes, troubled moderate Chartists and led to division within the ranks soon thereafter. In December 1838 Stephens was arrested for unlawful assembly, one of the earliest arrests of the Chartist leadership. Throughout the countryside the Chartists circulated their People's Charter in print, and with massive support the leadership decided to organize a national petition as well as a national convention – the General Convention of the Industrious Classes.

A failed national convention in London in February 1839 was followed by another in Birmingham in May. The Birmingham convention was also unsuccessful, in part because of a polarized vision of the means to achieve Chartist ends. On the one hand, the “physical force Chartists” were willing to use violence and intimidation to attain their goals. On the other hand, the “moral force Chartists,” which included William Lovett, sought to induce change through non-violent rallies, pamphleteering, and petitioning. Nevertheless, the convention decided on several courses of action. They planned a run on the banks, which would disrupt financial systems. “Exclusive dealing” would mean that they would only buy from Chartist tradespeople. And, finally, they decided on the “Sacred Month,” a general strike that would force the government to concede to their demands. On June 14 the Chartist leadership presented parliament with

their first charter, with 1.28 million signatures. Before it was read in parliament the Birmingham police force broke up a Chartist meeting on July 4, 1839, arresting two Chartist leaders. Denouncing the arrests at the convention, William Lovett was subsequently arrested. These so-called Bull Ring Riots led to the withdrawal of the moderate Birmingham Political Union's support for the Chartists. On the heels of the riots, parliament rejected the People's Charter and the convention collapsed.

As the government began arresting the Chartist leadership over the next months, they met small pockets of spontaneous resistance by workers. In November the government faced up to 5,000 Welsh ironworkers and colliers in armed confrontation. Descending on the town of Newport, the men were inspired by Chartist ideology and frustration over working conditions. Soldiers intercepted the men and killed over twenty workers, following this with the arrest, trial, and transportation of their leaders. In the wake of the Newport Rising, more workers organized themselves in Dewsbury, Sheffield, and Bradford, but these were easily suppressed, and the government continued arresting Chartist leaders and suspected conspirators. By January 1740 Chartism was in a shambles.

National Charter Association and the Decline of Chartism

The second stage of Chartism took place from the summer of 1840 to 1842. This period in the movement's history was characterized by strong organization in the Midlands and the North. While Chartism's leaders were still in prison, James Leach, a radical organizer from Manchester, and Robert Kemp Philp, a newsvendor from Bath, organized the National Charter Association (NCA). The NCA's stated purpose was to pursue universal male suffrage through peaceful means, specifically through petitioning. Its significance was in providing a centrally organized administration for Chartism, which would have branches throughout

Britain. While the branches were generally concentrated in the industrial towns of the Midlands, the NCA gained a larger following in the economic downturn of 1841–2. And, with O'Connor's support – most significantly through turning over the Northern Star to the NCA – the second Chartist petition in 1842 gathered 3.3 million signatures. The NCA's branches eventually totaled 400 with 50,000 members. Nevertheless, their success was short lived.

For a second time, parliament rejected the Chartist petition outright. And once again, in the wake of its failure, the political climate merged with social dissatisfaction and economic turmoil to mobilize the working classes. In the industrial towns of the Midlands and the North, laborers sabotaged machinery and went on strike, protesting cuts in their wages. Removing boiler plugs was a popular way to shut down production, and the prevalence of this action led to this period in working-class activism to be known as the Plug Plots. Violence increased throughout the summer of 1842 and there were frequent confrontations with the military. The workers' demands reflect the extent to which their economic situation found voice through Chartist politics. Many of the strike petitions required that Chartist principles be met before they would return to work. Despite their ambivalent reaction to what nearly amounted to a general strike, the Chartist leaders were once again arrested. Even as the NCA failed to support the workers, the government quelled the movement through extensive arrests.

Between 1842 and 1848 the Chartist agenda transformed. There was some disagreement among the leadership about the next course of action. Some, such as Bronterre O'Brien, favored joining reform-minded moderates in the abolitionist Joseph Sturge's National Complete Suffrage Union. O'Brien failed in the face of O'Connor's objections, and the two men disagreed publicly in debates and in the press. Chartism's six points were put on hold while leaders pursued a variety of alternative agendas. O'Brien battled the Anti-Corn Law League in his National Reformer.

O'Connor focused on creating a Chartist Cooperative Land Society, for which he received approval from the NCA in 1843. His idea was to form cooperatives which would give land back to the people, potentially giving them the right to vote, and relieve some of the pressures caused by an oversupply of urban labor. Between 1845 and 1848 O'Connor had 70,000 subscribers contributing small amounts to a subscription total of £2.10s. He used this money to purchase five estates, which were divided into smaller properties and let by ballot. Complicated lawsuits and failed efforts to create a friendly society and a joint stock company eventually caused O'Connor's land scheme to collapse in financial turmoil.

As Chartism's leaders struggled to address social reform, the government pursued a similar path, but to different ends. Much of the support for Chartism came from people who saw that their social condition was, in part, the product of a government that was unwilling to reform itself. Disenfranchised, Chartism was their political voice. Once the government responded with limited reforms that appealed to the working classes, Chartism's base of support began to erode. Those wishing for moderate reform found that parliament was responding, and they began to abandon more radical reformers – especially the "physical force Chartists." For example, the administration found widespread working-class support for the Factory Acts of the 1840s. These laws removed women and children from certain industries, such as mining. Or, they limited the hours that women and children could work in factories. The justifications and implications had important consequences for working-class gender and labor relations. On the one hand, the Factory Acts worked from the premise that women were degraded by certain forms of labor – in particular those that undermined the idealized image of bourgeois domesticity. Many among the working classes, including the Chartists, absorbed the image of domesticity and separate spheres ideology as a way to reassert a patriarchal vision of the family. To be masculine was to be the wage-earning head of a household. To be feminine was to be "the angel in the house," as Victorian writers later

described the ideal. On the other hand, the removal of women from wage labor promised less competition and higher wages for men. From this perspective, female workers had become a threat to the success of male workers in a laissez-faire economy. By passing these Acts the government appeared to be reasserting the patriarchal moral order as well as moderating the economic order. Coupled with inquiries and reforms of public health, education, and even the Poor Laws, the British government seemed, to many, to be protecting the rights of the people.

When the 1848 revolution swept through France, Feargus O'Connor and his fellow Chartists prepared to petition the government in a third People's Charter. Promising 5 million signatures, the Chartists were only able to muster 1.9 million. This lack of support reflects a general dissatisfaction with the Chartist cause among the working classes. Still, with revolution spreading in Europe, the palpable threat of an Irish revolution, and riots sparked by economic distress in England and Scotland, O'Connor believed that he could force constitutional change.

In April 1848 he amassed 150,000 workers at Kennington Common, just south of Westminster. These men planned to march the petition to parliament, but over 12,000 troops and police stood in their way. Rather than risk a violent clash, O'Connor presented the petition to parliament himself. And, for a final time, the government rejected the Chartist petition. As in 1839 and 1842, the rejection of the petition led to violent confrontation and mass arrests in urban areas. However, unlike previous incarnations of Chartism, the movement faded after the 1848 defeat. In part, this was the result of an ensuing alliance between reformers, trade unionists, and liberals. Nevertheless, the Chartist movement provided a model for working-class organization and helped establish a working-class consciousness in nineteenth-century Britain.

SEE ALSO: Anti-Corn Law Agitation, Britain, 19th Century; Britain, Trade Union Movement; Class Identity and Protest; European Revolutions of

1848; Irish Nationalism; O'Brien, Bronterre (1805–1864); O'Connor, Feargus (1796–1855); Owen, Robert (1771–1858); Poor Law, Britain, 1834; Reform Bills, Britain, 1867 and 1884; Swing Riots; Tolpuddle Martyrs, Britain, 1834

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